



(U) The Most Northerly Permanent Settlement in the World -- And SIGINTers Are There

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(U) *Alert, a facility in the high Arctic, was the "jewel in Canada's Cold War collection crown" and still operates today.*

(U) Diamond in the Rough

(U) On 9 April 1950, a US Dakota on skis celebrated Easter Sunday by touching down on the ice of Alert Bay on the northeastern tip of Ellesmere Island. On behalf of the Canadian Department of Transport and the US Weather Bureau, the onboard work party began construction on a Joint Arctic Weather Station (JAWS). In so doing, they established the most northern permanently inhabited settlement in the world.



(U) The hazards of such a remote site were driven home within months when a Royal Canadian Air Force Lancaster crashed killing all nine people on board. That tragedy would be followed by the crash of a US C-54D in 1952, a survey Piper in 1965, a helicopter in 1988 and a Canadian Hercules in 1991.

(U) **Alert soon caught the attention of Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) planners in Ottawa and Washington.** The Cold War was heating up, and there could be no greater threat to North America than Soviet bombers coming across the Pole. A high Arctic site was needed for intelligence indications and warnings. Comparative tests were recommended for Alert, Resolute and Nord, Greenland.

(U) On a bleak afternoon in late August 1957, a survey party landed at Alert for a six month sampling. Living conditions were challenging to say the least. Water had to be hauled from a nearby lake; sewage in turn carted off to the infamous "Shwailets Bay" for burial. Contact with the outside world came from Canadian supply flights every six weeks and occasional US transports from Thule, Greenland.



(U) **The survey soon turned into a permanent station.** Over the next several years, Alert grew to over 200 winter inhabitants and often over 300 in the busy summer construction season. The site proved not only the jewel in Canada's Cold War collection crown but also a vital cog in overall Allied coverage of the Soviet Union. Remodeling and downsizing over the years have made the station a leaner, meaner operation, but one that is still worth its weight in gold.

(U) *Editor's note: Have you ever visited Alert? If so, we'd like to hear your impressions of the place. Make your entry in the [SIDtoday Blog](#). (A couple of interesting stories have been posted already.)*

(U//FOUO) *In addition, our thanks go to the author, a historian at Canada's Communications Security Establishment, for approving this article's publication on SIDtoday.*

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